

Math and science summit a worthy endeavor

Were you at the D-11 Town Meeting? I was. Bet you weren't.

I bet you weren't because I counted maybe 30 people — tops. I know we're all busy, and not everybody lives in District 11. But an earthquake is coming, and we need to get ready.

Town meetings like last week's should be held in every school district across America. Without grassroots involvement of parents, teachers, administrators, and taxpayers, nothing will ever change. And change we must.

We must change because the world is becoming a dramatically different place. The Internet is everywhere. National borders mean less and less. Capital flows at the speed of light. We are moving to friction-free capitalism and an information-based economy. And we are not ready.

We are not ready because math and science education in America is deeply and profoundly broken. On what should be non-partisan issues, we are split along partisan lines. But which side of the line are you on? That depends if it's math or science.

On math, the conservatives are progressive, and liberals reactionary. Conservatives want math reform, liberals do not. The conservatives are right.

Fifteen years ago, the Department of Education adopted standards from the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics that de-emphasized math facts, encouraged calculator use, and encouraged more emphasis on identity politics. (NCTM's president often referred to the different ways white males, females, and non-Asian minorities learn). Textbook companies sell textbooks, so they developed programs tuned to those standards and lobbied the DOE for endorsement.

Some programs earned a "promising" or a coveted "exemplary" rating, and the floodgates were opened. Publishers proudly broadcast the endorsements. Who could say no to the DOE? But the results since then have been a national tragedy.

Liberals are opposed to math reform because, as far as I can tell, conservatives favor it. Teachers may also like the status quo because content-poor math programs are easier to teach and they make kids happy (along with, sadly, many parents). But less than a third of Colorado 10th graders are "proficient" in math. For minorities, the numbers are three times worse. This is a group that liberals supposedly want to help.



OPINION
BARRY FAGIN
Contributing
columnist

I just don't understand it.

The problem is that modern liberalism attracts people who believe all answers are relative. More accurately, perhaps, they are skeptical of truths that apply all the time and everywhere, so they focus instead on power relationships and on how people feel. No wonder they find "fuzzy" math programs attractive.

When it comes to science education, however, the roles reverse. Science is humanity's way of coming up with right answers about the world. Unfortunately, they are not

always answers people like. When that happens, I wind up battling conservatives who seek to weaken science education by admitting theology into science class.

Suddenly, I'm allied with liberals in defense of objective truth. Our opponents believe if the answers of science conflict with their deeply held beliefs, science must be wrong.

I teach science to some of the nation's brightest college students. I've also taught calculus and had the good fortune to make some mathematical discoveries. Both subjects are important to me and exciting to teach. As someone who wants correct math and correct science in American public schools, what exactly am I supposed to do?

Work, I suppose.

Work to make people understand that we are losing jobs to the Indians and the Chinese because they work harder, charge less, and just plain "get it" when it comes to math and science.

Work to convince young people that, as a Business Week cover story proclaimed, "Math will rock your world." That's where the innovations of the future will come from.

Work to convince school boards that people who are good at science and math are under no moral obligation to teach in their classrooms, but offering salaries a little closer to industry might help.

Most importantly, work to convince the public that education is not built on unearned self-esteem and identity politics, but on right answers and teaching young people how to find them. Until America rediscovers and embraces that objective truth, our days as the steamroller of the world economy are numbered. In time, we'll just be part of the pavement.

Fagin, of Colorado Springs, is a senior fellow at the Independence Institute. His column appears on alternate Thursdays. Readers may e-mail him at barry@faginfamily.net.